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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [AG](#)
SUBJECT: OPPOSITION PARTIES TAKING DIFFERENT PATHS

REF: A. ALGIERS 282

[1](#)B. ALGIERS 330

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, a.i. Thomas F. Daughton;
reasons 1.4 (b, d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: The four major Algerian opposition parties -- the Socialist Workers' Party, the moderate Islamist Movement for National Reform (Islah), the Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD), and the Front of Socialist Forces (FFS) -- are taking very different approaches in the lead up to May 17 parliamentary election. The FFS has chosen to boycott the poll; the Socialist Workers' and RCD Parties are actively competing for seats; and Islah, prohibited by the government from appearing on the ballot under the leadership of its leader, Abdallah Djaballah (ref A), is trying to run candidates as independents. According to an Islah MP, Interior Minister Zerhouni told Djaballah that the latter's arch rival, Mohamed Boulahia, was officially considered to be Islah's "temporary leader." While effectively sidelining Djaballah's Islah from the electoral process, the government has given the RCD leader, Said Sadi, unprecedented access to government-owned media in an attempt to showcase that the May election will be fully contested. End Summary.

OUT OF THE GAME ENTIRELY

[1](#)2. (C) Islah Party Secretary and MP Lakhdar Benkhellaf gave PolEc Chief a readout March 26 of the meeting he and Djaballah had the previous day with Interior Minister Zerhouni. According to Benkhellaf, Zerhouni said that Islah could not appear on the ballot for the May parliamentary election under Djaballah's leadership. Zerhouni informed Djaballah that the government considered Mohamed Boulahia the "temporary leader" of Islah while disputes surrounding the party leadership were resolved in the Algerian courts. Djaballah, according to Benkhellaf, pointed out to Zerhouni that two separate 2006 court decisions resolved matters in his favor, not Boulahia's. Zerhouni did not respond to Djaballah's "case closed" argument. Zerhouni conceded, however, that Djaballah and his leadership could continue to occupy Islah's headquarters since Boulahia's leadership was only "temporary." (Comment: Zerhouni is doing Djaballah no favors and likely wishes to avoid the spectacle of evicting Djaballah's loyalists by force. End Comment.) Benkhellaf predicted that the cloud over Djaballah's leadership of Islah would dissipate following the election and that he would once again be allowed to lead Islah "permanently." Of course, added Benkhellaf, Islah at that point will be but a shell of its former self.

13. (C) According to Benkhellaf, in their meeting Djaballah asked Zerhouni for a written decision on the party's leadership. Zerhouni said there would be no written decision and stated that Boulahia -- as "temporary leader" of Islah -- could field candidates in the May election under the Islah banner. Benkhellaf told PolEc Chief that Boulahia and his leadership comprised a maximum of ten individuals, and the Islah MP claimed that the total number of Boulahia loyalists was no more than 30. Benkhellaf observed that Boulahia would be unable to win any seats given that level of support. That being the case, he said, Djaballah had told Zerhouni that Boulahia's status as "temporary leader" was clearly part of a larger government conspiracy to prevent Islah from winning any seats as a party. Benkhellaf observed that the only way he and other Islah members could win parliamentary seats would be by running as independent candidates. He said this was an uphill battle, but he believed there was a good chance that he and nine other Islah members could win the ten seats required to form a parliamentary group in the next session of parliament. Benkhellaf nonetheless conceded that quantity of seats was a far cry from the 42 seats Islah won in the last parliamentary election.

BOYCOTT OR PARTICIPATE?

14. (C) The FFS, a predominantly Berber party with a socialist orientation, announced in early March that it will boycott the upcoming election. Its de facto leader, Ali Laskri, told Charge and PolEc Chief March 19 that as long as the state of emergency continued and Algerians could not express themselves freely in a closed political space, there was little point contesting in a rigged election that at best would garner the party seats in an ineffective parliament. Charge told Laskri while we respected the FFS decision to boycott the elections, we nonetheless regretted it because the party's winning even a handful of seats in parliament would give it a national platform for its ideas. Unlike Laskri, the other socialist leader in the field, Louisa Hanoune, is on the campaign trail. As the leader of the Socialist Workers' Party, Hanoune declined to meet with us, citing her busy campaign schedule. (Comment: Since the rallying cry of her campaign is opposing U.S. political and economic aims, the unavailability of members of her party to meet with us is not surprising. End Comment.)

15. (C) Unlike the FFS, the other predominantly Berber political party, RCD, is actively campaigning. RCD leader Said Sadi told Charge and PolEc Chief March 18 that he expected RCD to win 40-50 seats in May if there was no fraud. Sadi said in the 1997 parliamentary election RCD was awarded only four seats in the wilaya (province) of Algiers, even though it should have rightfully won 15 out of the 24 contested seats that year. Shortly before our meeting, the RCD leader was invited to speak live on the government-controlled radio for 90 minutes -- the first such invitation since 2004. Sadi, who told us that Djaballah had been excluded from the election without any legal basis, wondered if his first invitation in three years to appear on the electronic media was a new opening or a window that would quickly close after the vote. (Note: Several political observers have told us Sadi's new-found fame was no coincidence in light of the decision to exclude Djaballah from participating in the election. Our contacts, including Benkhellaf, maintain that the GOA needed a strong opposition figure on the airwaves to counter the public skepticism over Djaballah's exclusion. End Note.) Sadi noted that if, as the government maintains, holding a party congress is a requirement for fielding candidates for the May elections, Islah is not the sole transgressor. (Note: While we agree with Sadi's reasoning, we are aware of no political parties other than Islah being prevented from appearing on the ballot for having failed to hold a party congress. End Note.)

16. (C) Sadi argued that despite the tilted playing field facing opposition parties, there was "no alternative" to participation in the election. Algeria had many problems, he said, and from his private discussions with presidential

coalition parties there was an understanding that change was needed. Sadi said that the governing coalition leaders' recognition of the need for change had to be translated into the government recognizing the need for change. If that transformation took place, Sadi said, discussions with the opposition could take place with the aim of jointly addressing and fixing problems. He observed that President Bouteflika had been a national figure since 1962. Despite his contribution to removing terrorism as "general threat" to society, Bouteflika had been on the political scene for too long. The Algerian people, Sadi said, were frustrated and joked to each other that Algeria had "much money and much misery." Sadi said one of his concerns was the deterioration of the army's cohesion since Bouteflika became president. While establishing civilian control of the military was vital, Sadi observed that this once highly functional institution was now faring no better than the rest of Algeria.

¶7. (C) COMMENT: Even in a culture where conspiracy theories abound, the government's plot against Djaballah appears to be real (see also ref B). Benkhellaf said Djaballah would soon organize a press conference denouncing the government's undemocratic and unlawful behavior. While Djaballah's complaints will likely not be aired on radio or television, both controlled by the government, the independent written press' coverage of Djaballah will undoubtedly further fuel the despair of Algerians who believe that they cannot influence their government or meaningfully elect their leaders. From our conversations with Algerians living in the capital, it is evident that they see Djaballah's sidelining and Sadi's sudden fame as a clear government effort to manipulate them. Farther from the capital, though, we suspect that Algerians whose primary or sole source of national news is state media draw a different conclusion. Those Algerians most likely take at face value Prime Minister Belkhadem's March 20 assertions on national television that the government supported the democratic process, meant no ill will toward Islah, and was examining carefully the merits of Djaballah's case.
DAUGHTON